

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN  
SOUTHERN DIVISION

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J. B. BLACK,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 1:11-cv-274

v.

Honorable Robert Holmes Bell

BERNARD TALBOTT et al.,

Defendants.

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**OPINION**

This is a civil rights action brought by a state prisoner pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983. The Court has granted Plaintiff leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. Under the Prison Litigation Reform Act, PUB. L. NO. 104-134, 110 STAT. 1321 (1996), the Court is required to dismiss any prisoner action brought under federal law if the complaint is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2), 1915A; 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court must read Plaintiff's *pro se* complaint indulgently, *see Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972), and accept Plaintiff's allegations as true, unless they are clearly irrational or wholly incredible. *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 33 (1992). Applying these standards, Plaintiff's action will be dismissed for failure to state a claim.

## **Discussion**

### **I. Factual allegations**

Plaintiff J. B. Black presently is incarcerated with the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) at the Thumb Correctional Facility, though the actions he complains of occurred while he was housed at the Michigan Reformatory (RMI). He sues the following RMI officials: Food Service Steward Bernard Talbott and Regional Business Manager Denise Trieweler.

On April 24, 2009, Plaintiff was cleaning the laundry room of the prison kitchen. (Pl.'s Description of Incident, Attach. to Compl., Page ID#10.) Defendant Talbot ordered another prisoner to pull up his clothes. (*Id.*) After Talbott discovered stolen food hidden under the other prisoner's shirt, Defendant Talbott "made [Plaintiff] expose [his] upper body, and turn around," (Compl., ¶ 13, Page ID#3), which Plaintiff describes as a "strip search." (Compl., ¶ 8, Page ID#2.) Plaintiff asked Talbott what he would have to do to stop the harassment. Talbott allegedly responded, "You need to suck my dick for it to stop." (*Id.*) Plaintiff contends that Defendant Talbott's conduct constituted sexual harassment in violation of the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments and state law.

Plaintiff filed a grievance, which was denied at all three steps. The Step II grievance was responded to by Defendant Trieweler. Plaintiff alleges that Trieweler's response was in violation of MDOC policy, which makes the warden of a facility the appropriate Step II respondent. *See* MICH. DEP'T OF CORR., Policy Directive 03.02.130, ¶ DD. He further asserts that Trieweler's improper response violated his right to due process and demonstrated a conspiracy with Talbott to deprive Plaintiff of his rights under the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments.

For relief, Plaintiff seeks a declaratory judgment, together with compensatory and punitive damages.

II. Failure to state a claim

A complaint may be dismissed for failure to state a claim if “‘it fails to give the defendant fair notice of what the . . . claim is and the grounds upon which it rests.’” *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 45-46 (1957)). While a complaint need not contain detailed factual allegations, a plaintiff’s allegations must include more than labels and conclusions. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555; *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 129 S. Ct. 1937, 1949 (2009) (“Threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.”). The court must determine whether the complaint contains “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.” *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570. “A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Iqbal*, 129 S. Ct. at 1949. Although the plausibility standard is not equivalent to a “‘probability requirement,’ . . . it asks for more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully.” *Iqbal*, 129 S. Ct. at 1949 (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556). “[W]here the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint has alleged – but it has not ‘show[n]’ – that the pleader is entitled to relief.” *Iqbal*, 129 S. Ct. at 1950 (quoting FED. R. CIV. P. 8(a)(2)); *see also Hill v. Lappin*, 630 F.3d 468, 470-71 (6th Cir. 2010) (holding that the *Twombly/Iqbal* plausibility standard applies to dismissals of prisoner cases on initial review under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915(e)(2)(B)(i)).

To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege the violation of a right secured by the federal Constitution or laws and must show that the deprivation was committed by a person acting under color of state law. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988); *Dominguez v. Corr. Med. Servs.*, 555 F.3d 543, 549 (6th Cir. 2009). Because § 1983 is a method for vindicating federal rights, not a source of substantive rights itself, the first step in an action under § 1983 is to identify the specific constitutional right allegedly infringed. *Albright v. Oliver*, 510 U.S. 266, 271 (1994).

**A. Defendant Trieweleir**

Plaintiff alleges that Defendant Trieweleir improperly acted as the Step II respondent to Plaintiff's grievance, in violation of MDOC policy. Section 1983 does not provide redress for a violation of a state law or procedure. *Pyles v. Raisor*, 60 F.3d 1211, 1215 (6th Cir. 1995); *Sweeton v. Brown*, 27 F.3d 1162, 1166 (6th Cir. 1994). Moreover, Plaintiff has no due process right to any particular grievance procedure. The Sixth Circuit and other circuit courts have held that there is no constitutionally protected due process right to an effective prison grievance procedure. *Walker v. Mich. Dep't of Corr.*, 128 F. App'x 441, 445 (6th Cir. 2005); *Young v. Gundy*, 30 F. App'x 568, 569-70 (6th Cir. 2002); *Carpenter v. Wilkinson*, No. 99-3562, 2000 WL 190054, at \*2 (6th Cir. Feb. 7, 2000); *see also Antonelli v. Sheahan*, 81 F.3d 1422, 1430 (7th Cir.1996); *Adams v. Rice*, 40 F.3d 72, 75 (4th Cir. 1994). Michigan law does not create a liberty interest in the grievance procedure. *See Olim v. Wakinekona*, 461 U.S. 238, 249 (1983); *Wynn v. Wolf*, No. 93-2411, 1994 WL 105907, at \*1 (6th Cir. Mar. 28, 1994). Because Plaintiff has no liberty interest in the grievance process, Defendant Trieweleir's alleged failure to follow MDOC policy did not deprive Plaintiff of due process.

Further, Plaintiff's claim that Trieweiler conspired with Talbott to deprive Plaintiff of his constitutional rights is wholly conclusory. To state a claim for conspiracy, a plaintiff must plead with particularity, as vague and conclusory allegations unsupported by material facts are insufficient. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 565 (recognizing that allegations of conspiracy must be supported by allegations of fact that support a "plausible suggestion of conspiracy," not merely a "possible" one); *Fieger v. Cox*, 524 F.3d 770, 776 (6th Cir. 2008); *Spadafore v. Gardner*, 330 F.3d 849, 854 (6th Cir. 2003); *Gutierrez v. Lynch*, 826 F.2d 1534, 1538 (6th Cir. 1987); *Smith v. Rose*, 760 F.2d 102, 106 (6th Cir. 1985); *Pukyrys v. Olson*, No. 95-1778, 1996 WL 636140, at \*1 (6th Cir. Oct. 30, 1996). A plaintiff's allegations must show (1) the existence or execution of the claimed conspiracy, (2) overt acts relating to the promotion of the conspiracy, (3) a link between the alleged conspirators, and (4) an agreement by the conspirators to commit an act depriving plaintiff of a federal right. *Lepley v. Dresser*, 681 F.Supp. 418, 422 (W.D. Mich. 1988). "[V]ague allegations of a wide-ranging conspiracy are wholly conclusory and are, therefore, insufficient to state a claim." *Hartsfield v. Mayer*, No. 95-1411, 1196 WL 43541, at \*3 (6th Cir. Feb. 1, 1996). A simple allegation that defendants conspired to cover up wrongful actions is too conclusory and too speculative to state a claim of conspiracy. *Birrell v. State of Mich.*, No. 94-2456, 1995 WL 355662, at \*2 (6th Cir. June 13, 1995).

Plaintiff's allegations of conspiracy are conclusory and speculative. His claim against Trieweiler, even viewed in the light most favorable to Plaintiff, alleges only that Trieweiler improperly responded to his grievance. Section 1983 liability may not be imposed simply because a supervisor denied an administrative grievance or failed to act based upon information contained in a grievance. *See Shehee v. Luttrell*, 199 F.3d 295, 300 (6th Cir. 1999). Moreover, the mere fact

that Defendant Trieweler denied Plaintiff's grievance is insufficient to support an inference of conspiracy. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556 (to state a claim, allegations must contain "enough factual matter (taken as true) to suggest that an agreement was made."). Plaintiff alleges no other facts connecting the Defendants. The Supreme Court has recognized that, although parallel conduct may be consistent with an unlawful agreement, allegations are insufficient to state a claim where the alleged conduct "was not only compatible with, but indeed was more likely explained by, lawful, unchoreographed . . . behavior." *Iqbal*, 129 S. Ct. at 1250. Plaintiff therefore fails to state a plausible claim of conspiracy.

For all these reasons, Plaintiff fails to state a claim against Defendant Trieweler.

#### **B. Defendant Talbott**

Plaintiff claims that Defendant Talbott violated his rights under the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments by ordering Plaintiff to lift his shirt to expose his torso for examination and by making a sexually harassing comment.

As a prisoner incarcerated under a criminal conviction, Plaintiff's principal substantive rights are guaranteed by the Cruel and Unusual Punishments Clause of the Eighth Amendment. *See Whitley v. Albers*, 475 U.S. 312, 327 (1986). The Eighth Amendment imposes a constitutional limitation on the power of the states to punish those convicted of crimes. Punishment may not be "barbarous" nor may it contravene society's "evolving standards of decency." *Rhodes v. Chapman*, 452 U.S. 337, 345-46 (1981). The Amendment, therefore, prohibits conduct by prison officials that involves the "unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain." *Ivey v. Wilson*, 832 F.2d 950, 954 (6th Cir. 1987) (per curiam) (quoting *Rhodes*, 452 U.S. at 346). The deprivation alleged must result in the denial of the "minimal civilized measure of life's necessities."

*Rhodes*, 452 U.S. at 347; *see also Wilson v. Yaklich*, 148 F.3d 596, 600-01 (6th Cir. 1998). The Eighth Amendment is only concerned with “deprivations of essential food, medical care, or sanitation” or “other conditions intolerable for prison confinement.” *Rhodes*, 452 U.S. at 348 (citation omitted). Moreover, “[n]ot every unpleasant experience a prisoner might endure while incarcerated constitutes cruel and unusual punishment within the meaning of the Eighth Amendment.” *Ivey*, 832 F.2d at 954.

“[B]ecause the sexual harassment or abuse of an inmate by a corrections officer can never serve a legitimate penological purpose and may well result in severe physical and psychological harm, such abuse can, in certain circumstances, constitute the ‘unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain’ forbidden by the Eighth Amendment.” *Freitas v. Ault*, 109 F.3d 1335, 1338 (8th Cir. 1997) (quoted cases omitted). “To prevail on a constitutional claim of sexual harassment, an inmate must therefore prove, as an objective matter, that the alleged abuse or harassment caused ‘pain’ and, as a subjective matter, that the officer in question acted with a sufficiently culpable state of mind.” *Freitas*, 109 F.3d at 1338 (citing *Hudson v. McMillian*, 503 U.S. 1, 8 (1992)).

A visual search of a male prisoner’s upper body is neither cruel nor unusual, even when accompanied by a sexual comment. *See Roden v. Sowders*, 84 F. App’x 611, 613 (6th Cir. 2003) (holding that a strip search, even accompanied by the laughter of a prison guard, did not rise to an Eighth Amendment violation). The use of harassing or degrading language by a prison official, although unprofessional and deplorable, does not rise to constitutional dimensions. *See Ivey v. Wilson*, 832 F.2d 950, 954-55 (6th Cir. 1987); *see also Johnson v. Dellatifa*, 357 F.3d 539, 546 (6th Cir. 2004) (harassment and verbal abuse do not constitute the type of infliction of pain that the

Eighth Amendment prohibits). Moreover, circuit courts consistently have held that sexual harassment, absent contact or touching, does not satisfy the objective requirement because such conduct does not constitute the unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain. *See Morales v. Mackalm*, 278 F.3d 126, 132 (2d Cir. 2002) (allegations that prison guard asked prisoner to have sex with her and to masturbate in front of her and other female staffers did not rise to level of Eighth Amendment violation); *Barney v. Pulsipher*, 143 F.3d 1299, 1311 n.11 (10th Cir. 1998) (allegations that county jailer subjected female prisoners to severe verbal sexual harassment and intimidation was not sufficient to state a claim under the Eighth Amendment); *Howard v. Everett*, No. 99-1277EA, 2000 WL 268493, at \*1 (8th Cir. Mar. 10, 2000) (sexual comments and gestures by prison guards did not constitute unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain); *cf. Seltzer-Bey v. Delo*, 66 F.3d 961, 962-63 (8th Cir. 1995) (allegations that prison guard conducted daily strip searches, made sexual comments about prisoner's penis and buttocks, and rubbed prisoner's buttocks with nightstick were sufficient to withstand motion for summary judgment); *Zander v. McGinnis*, No. 97-1484, 1998 WL 384625, at \*2 (6th Cir. June 19, 1998) (verbal abuse of mouthing "pet names" at prisoner for ten months failed to state an Eighth Amendment claim); *Murray v. United States Bureau of Prisons*, No. 95-5204, 1997 WL 34677, at \*3 (6th Cir. Jan. 28, 1997) (magistrate judge correctly held that verbal abuse in the form of offensive remarks regarding a transsexual prisoner's bodily appearance, transsexualism, and presumed sexual preference cannot state an Eighth Amendment claim). Other courts have held that even minor, isolated incidents of sexual touching coupled with occasional offensive sexual remarks do not rise to the level of an Eighth Amendment violation. *See, e.g., Jackson v. Madery*, 158 F. App'x 656, 661 (6th Cir. 2005) (correction officer's conduct in allegedly rubbing and grabbing prisoner's buttocks in degrading manner was "isolated, brief, and not severe"



and so failed to meet Eighth Amendment standards); *Johnson v. Ward*, No. 99-1596, 2000 WL 659354, at \*1 (6th Cir. May 11, 2000) (male prisoner's claim that a male officer placed his hand on the prisoner's buttock in a sexual manner and made an offensive sexual remark did not meet the objective component of the Eighth Amendment); *Berryhill v. Schriro*, 137 F.3d 1073, 1075 (8th Cir. 1998) (where inmate failed to assert that he feared sexual abuse, two brief touches to his buttocks could not be construed as sexual assault); *accord Boxer X v. Harris*, 437 F.3d 1107, 1111 (11th Cir. 2006); *Boddie v. Schneider*, 105 F.3d 857, 859-61 (2d Cir. 1997) (court dismissed as inadequate prisoner's claim that female corrections officer made a pass at him, squeezed his hand, touched his penis, called him a "sexy black devil," pressed her breasts against his chest, and pressed against his private parts).

Here, Plaintiff does not allege that Defendant Talbott ever touched him or had any form of physical contact with him. Even if, as Plaintiff alleges, Defendant Talbott asked Plaintiff to lift his shirt for the purpose of sexual gratification and made the reported comment, the conduct does not rise to the level of an Eighth Amendment violation.

Moreover, Plaintiff does not even suggest in his complaint that he was subjected to any physical injury whatsoever as a result of the search. Rather, Plaintiff claims a mental or emotional injury as a result of the incident. Title 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(e) precludes any claim by a prisoner "for mental or emotional injury suffered while in custody without a prior showing of physical injury." The Sixth Circuit repeatedly has held that Eighth Amendment claims for monetary relief based on mental or emotional injury are precluded by § 1997e(e) absent a showing of physical injury. See, e.g., *Jackson v. Herrington*, 393 F. App'x 348, 354 (6th Cir. 2010); *Harden-Bey v. Rutter*, 524 F.3d 789, 795 (6th Cir. 2008).

Plaintiff's claim that Defendant Talbott engaged in an improper search also fails to demonstrate a Fourth Amendment violation. In *Bell v. Wolfish*, 441 U.S. 520 (1979), the Supreme Court questioned whether a person who is confined as a pretrial detainee or convicted person is entitled to the protections of the Fourth Amendment. *Id.* at 556-57; *see also Aldini v. Johnson*, 609 F.3d 858, 864 (6th Cir. 2010) (recognizing that the Fourth Amendment typically protects free citizens, the Eighth Amendment is the primary protection for convicted persons, and the Fourteenth Amendment protects pretrial detainees). Assuming some Fourth Amendment rights are retained by prisoners, however, the *Wolfish* Court held that even visual body cavity inspections during strip searches of pre-trial detainees and convicted prisoners after they had contact with outsiders were not "unreasonable" searches under the Fourth Amendment. The Court stated that applying "[t]he test of reasonableness under the Fourth Amendment . . . [i]n each case . . . requires a balancing of the need for the particular search against the invasion of personal rights that the search entails. Courts must consider the scope of the particular intrusion, the manner in which it is conducted, the justification for initiating it, and the place in which it is conducted." *Id.* at 559. The *Wolfish* Court pointed out that a "detention facility is a unique place fraught with serious security dangers. Smuggling of money, drugs, weapons, and other contraband is all too common an occurrence." *Id.*

Here, although Plaintiff describes Talbott's demand as a "strip search," the allegations in the complaint indicate that Plaintiff was merely asked to raise his shirt, exposing part of his torso – a completely minor intrusion into a male prisoner's privacy. As discussed above, Defendant Talbott's minimal visual search of a prisoner working in the kitchen area unquestionably was reasonable in relation to ongoing, legitimate concerns about theft. Plaintiff, therefore, fails to state a claim under the Fourth Amendment.

Finally, Plaintiff broadly suggests that Talbott's conduct violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Equal Protection Clause commands that no state shall "deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." U.S. CONST. amend. XIV, § 1. A state practice generally will not require strict scrutiny unless it interferes with a fundamental right or discriminates against a suspect class of individuals. *Mass. Bd. of Ret. v. Murgia*, 427 U.S. 307, 312 (1976). Plaintiff does not suggest that he is a member of a suspect class, and "prisoners are not considered a suspect class for purposes of equal protection litigation." *Jackson v. Jamrog*, 411 F.3d 615, 619 (6th Cir. 2005); *see also Wilson v. Yaklich*, 148 F.3d 596, 604 (6th Cir.1998). In addition, prisoners do not have a fundamental right to photocopies under the Constitution.

Because neither a fundamental right nor a suspect class is at issue, the rational basis review standard applies. *Club Italia Soccer & Sports Org., Inc. v. Charter Twp. of Shelby*, 470 F.3d 286, 298 (6th Cir. 2006). "Under rational basis scrutiny, government action amounts to a constitutional violation only if it 'is so unrelated to the achievement of any combination of legitimate purposes that the court can only conclude that the government's actions were irrational.'" *Id.* (quoting *Warren v. City of Athens*, 411 F.3d 697, 710 (6th Cir. 2005)). To prove his equal protection claim, Plaintiff must demonstrate "intentional and arbitrary discrimination" by the state; that is, he must demonstrate that he "has been intentionally treated differently from others similarly situated and that there is no rational basis for the difference in treatment." *Vill. of Willowbrook v. Olech*, 528 U.S. 562, 564 (2000).

Plaintiff's own allegations demonstrate that the other prisoner located in the same area at the time of the search was subjected to the same request. He fails entirely to identify any

similarly situated person who was treated differently. He therefore fails to state an equal protection claim.

### **Conclusion**

Having conducted the review now required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court determines that Plaintiff's action will be dismissed for failure to state a claim pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c).

The Court must next decide whether an appeal of this action would be in good faith within the meaning of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3). *See McGore v. Wrigglesworth*, 114 F.3d 601, 611 (6th Cir. 1997). For the same reasons that the Court dismisses the action, the Court discerns no good-faith basis for an appeal. Should Plaintiff appeal this decision, the Court will assess the \$455.00 appellate filing fee pursuant to § 1915(b)(1), *see McGore*, 114 F.3d at 610-11, unless Plaintiff is barred from proceeding *in forma pauperis*, e.g., by the "three-strikes" rule of § 1915(g). If he is barred, he will be required to pay the \$455.00 appellate filing fee in one lump sum.

This is a dismissal as described by 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g).

A Judgment consistent with this Opinion will be entered.

Dated: April 14, 2011

/s/ Robert Holmes Bell  
ROBERT HOLMES BELL  
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE